

Transcript of Chairman Boehlert on E&E TV's OnPoint

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**Darren Samuelsohn:** Welcome to OnPoint. I'm Darren Samuelsohn. Joining us today is Congressman Sherwood Boehlert, Republican from New York and the chairman of the House Science Committee. Mr. Chairman thanks so much for coming on the show.

**Sherwood Boehlert:** It's good to be with you.

**Darren Samuelsohn:** You recently announced you were retiring from Congress after 24 years. Why are you leaving now?

**Sherwood Boehlert:** Well, I said it's about time. I'm going to approach 70 in September. I've been in this business, I came to Capitol Hill 42 years ago as a starry eyed young staffer, had three years off for good behavior. I was a county executive and then for the past 24 years I've been the chairman of the committee. And I've been on the fast track for all of this time and my family is saying, "Hey, ease up a little bit." So I'm going to ease up a little bit.

**Darren Samuelsohn:** And your plans when you go back to New York?

**Sherwood Boehlert:** Well, people say what are you going to do? My answer is what I'd darn well please, when I want to. I no longer have the burden of being forced to do something simply because this schedule demands it or this schedule demands it. I'll do what I want to do. I've got a book in here someplace. I intend to speak. I intend to be active in shaping public policy. People say to me, "Are you going to cash in and go down to K Street and be a lobbyist?" If I wanted to remain in this town I'd remain in the institution to shape public policy instead of being outside and paid to try to influence public policy. So I'm going to continue to be active. I'm not going to sit on the back porch in a chair, a rocking chair. And I'll follow my beloved Yankees. And I'll spend some time with my grandkids. And I'll write some stuff and who knows.

**Darren Samuelsohn:** Tell me your biggest accomplishment on energy and environmental issues while you've been on Capitol Hill.

**Sherwood Boehlert:** Well, the thing I'm proudest of, and there are a lot of things and it's tough to, tell me my favorite child, I've got four. My favorite grandchildren, I've got six. There is no favorite. But the thing I am particularly proud of is the Clean Air Act amendments of 1990, signed into law by President George Herbert Walker Bush. I was in the minority then, yet my provision of the Clean Air Act amendments, launching the nation's war on acid rain in fulfillment of a promise I made when I first was elected, is something that I shall never forget. But there are a lot of other things too.

**Darren Samuelsohn:** Tell me the one issue that you'd like to see done before you left or after you're gone.

**Sherwood Boehlert:** Well I'd like to see, to the credit of the president he's trying to give us something we don't have, a coherent workable national energy policy. I'd like to see something happen. The bill that came forward last year did not earn my support. I weighed the pluses and minuses and I found the minuses outweighed the pluses, so I couldn't support it. But to the credit of the administration, they're trying to put more money into the development of alternative energy sources, to the credit of the administration. They're talking about a hydrogen economy and they're making some advances there. But I still, they're not believers yet on CAFE, although they're beginning to believe and I see some crack, a hole in the dike. So we're going to work very soon, probably within the week, to have an amendment considered in line with the new energy proposal, coming out of Energy and Commerce that will increase CAFE standards from the present 25 mile per gallon to 33 miles a gallon over a 10-year period, which is a sensible plan. That would save us an inordinate amount of oil. And we are far too dependent on foreign source oil. We're a nation that consumes 21 million barrels of oil a day. We import 14 million of those barrels, mostly used in the transportation sector. And the irony of the whole thing is that at a time we're complaining about the balance of trade deficit we're starting every day with oil, at its present price, almost \$1 billion in the hole. Sending \$1 billion overseas to countries, many of which don't like us, don't share our value system, and ironically trying to undermine everything we stand for. Frank Gaffney who was assistant secretary of Defense during the Reagan administration says we're paying them to kill us. It's not a very good deal.

**Darren Samuelsohn:** As you're bringing an issue like CAFE forward you obviously are dealing with conservatives in the House, in the Senate as well, who don't want to see your proposal move forward. Give me a typical interaction that you have as a member of the moderate Republican House in your interactions with the conservatives. What do you say to try and convince them about your policy?

**Sherwood Boehlert:** Well, it's changing and here's why it's changing. You know we first brought it up in 107th Congress. It got 160 votes. Then I brought it up in the 108th Congress, got 162 votes. Not much progress, but nevertheless progress. Then I brought it up at the beginning of the current Congress, last year, at the beginning of year. It got 177 votes. Then we're going to deal with another energy bill later on in the year, the refinery bill. And I had every right to expect that the Rules Committee would make my amendment an order and we'd have a debate in the People's House, because we'd done it three times previously. Only this time they said, well, you've already had your vote this Congress. What's changed? I said what's changed? Katrina, \$3 a gallon gasoline and our phones are ringing off the hook, our faxes are on overdrive, mail is coming in by the ton. Do something about it. So I'm trying to do something about it. So I understand where the conservatives come from. And in many respects I am one of them, conservative. I don't like government mandates as a rule, but sometimes government has to mandate action when it represents good public policy in our national security interest. And so I tell them that your constituents are demanding of you that you do something about this. And don't you, aren't you concerned that we're so dependent on foreign source oil to fuel our economy? I try to reason with them. Then they come up and present the arguments. They say, "Well, safety is a factor. I'm concerned about safety." I can remember in the 108th

Congress when we had a debate on this issue on the floor. I knew in the closing arguments of the opponents of my CAFE amendment that I had won the debate on merit, but I was going to lose the vote because the leading opponents stood in the well of the House and said if the Boehlert CAFE amendment passes there will be thousands of dead bodies on our nation's highways. Well, what member of Congress wants to be identified with anything that offers the prospect of thousands of dead bodies? The only problem with that is it was dead wrong. You don't have to sacrifice weight and therefore safety to get fuel efficiency. That's just, not my theory, that's the theory for the academy, National Academy of Sciences.

**Darren Samuelsohn:** Is the safety debate over?

**Sherwood Boehlert:** Well, it's not. They're still using it. And the secretary of Transportation, Norm Mineta, I mean he used it in a letter to Speaker Hastert and to Senate Majority Leader Frist and said we've got to reform CAFE. Well, that's progress, when you get a Cabinet secretary of Transportation saying we've got to reform CAFE. He was not specific, but then he trotted out the old saw that you've got to be concerned about safety and we can't force regulations on the industry. That it will result in less safe vehicles. I called him up. He's an old friend. I said, Norm, your staff is not serving you well. That argument has gone by the boards a long time ago. Look at the National Academy of Sciences report. Look at the testimony that the witness from the Alliance of Automobile Manufacturers had before the Science Committee. I was sitting in the chair, asked a question, do you have to sacrifice safety to get fuel efficiency? Answer, no. That's not the exact exchange, but that is the sum and substance of it.

**Darren Samuelsohn:** I want to jump quickly to climate change here, real quickly, and just let's get to the heart of it. What would it take to get global warming legislation passed into law in this Congress or the next Congress?

**Sherwood Boehlert:** Well, it's doubtful if we can get it in this Congress, but hope springs eternal and we've got some positive action. Last year in the Senate the amendment by Bingaman got 55 or 56 votes, somewhere around in there, to 44 in opposition, which said we have to have, sometime in the future, some cap on emissions. Not defined, but just the willingness for the majority to vote for that was very positive. In this Congress, just last week, the Appropriations Committee dealing with Interior appropriation, said the same thing in a pass by voice vote. There are, unfortunately, an awful lot of people who think things like acid rain or global climate change is a figment of my imagination or the imagination of people who share this view that it's a serious problem and we have to deal with it. I point out to you that the president of United States has acknowledged the seriousness of global climate change. The president of the United States says man has contributed significantly to it and we've got to do something about it. So that's progress.

**Darren Samuelsohn:** Your interactions with the president on climate change, I remember reading an anecdote, really quickly, where you talked about climate change with him. What was his reaction?

**Sherwood Boehlert:** Well, I said to him, this was aboard Air Force One, not to drop names, but that's, I want to set the stage.

**Darren Samuelsohn:** You do want to drop.

**Sherwood Boehlert:** We're aboard Air Force One. We're flying back from upstate New York to Washington. I'm sitting with the president enjoying a peanut butter and jelly sandwich and a glass of milk, a high price lunch on Air Force One. And I said, "Mr. President, here's what I tell the people I represent. I tell them every time I talk with you about a sensitive and controversial subject, where there are some obvious differences, I always feel good." Pause for effect. "It's your staff that screws it up." But that came from the heart. I've known President Bush for a long time, long before he was president. And I respect him. I think he's a good guy. I think his heart's in the right place. But I know what's happening in the administration. They're not short of ideas and challenges competing for their time. You've got the war in Iraq. You've got war on terrorism. You've got the state of the economy. You've got prescription drug benefits for the elderly. You've got all these things. And down the line somewhere is environment. And so that doesn't get brought to his attention by his key staff members because he's going from one issue to the other almost 7/24.

**Darren Samuelsohn:** Sure. Well, speaking of time, I think you have to run off for a House vote, Mr. Chairman, so thank you so much for being on the program.

**Sherwood Boehlert:** Well, thank you for being interested in this because the thing that's very comforting to me is that the Main Street press, not just the technical and trade press, but the Main Street press is beginning to talk about things like CAFE standards, so people don't think CAFE is just some corner place to get a cup of coffee and a sandwich. It means something significant. And people are beginning to appreciate that global climate change is for real. I took a delegation with me down to Antarctica in January. Ten members of Congress, only three of us were committed believers in global climate change. The other seven were either neutral or skeptical. We went down to the South Pole, one of the most perfect labs anywhere on the face of this earth, National Science Foundation scientists in various disciplines. And almost every single one of them talked about how their science relates to global climate change and how serious the problem is. You know what? Every single one of them came back believers. So it's an education process. We've got to keep it up.

**Darren Samuelsohn:** OK. Well, thank you so much for your time and good luck to you in your career moving on forward as you leave Capitol Hill.

**Sherwood Boehlert:** Thank you so much.

**Darren Samuelsohn:** Until next time, this is Darren Samuelsohn for another edition of OnPoint. Thanks for watching.